

New Shades of Immersion Seen in the Sydney Sweeney Ad for American Jeans

The controversial Sydney Sweeney ad for American Jeans, with its jeans/genes homophone, illustrates how immersion — the dominant cultural form of late postmodern, late capitalist America — has moved from large-scale settings such as movie theaters, sports stadiums, theme parks, and concert performances (e.g., Taylor Swift). Beckoning immersive episodes that offer the stimulation and participatory feeling of large-scale events are now readily accessible at an individual's convenience. Immersion in this form is held out rather than sought out. With the Sydney ad, the controversy it stirred heightens its effect, adding ways of involvement and personal responses not found in fixed-location venues.

In his article “Sydney Sweeney Has a Secret,” New York Times columnist Frank Bruni laments Sweeney’s embrace of constant visibility, suggesting it detracts from the evident skill she demonstrates in roles in “The White Lotus” and “The Handmaid’s Tale”. But his disappointment signals the cultural shift where attention is no longer like grazing nor almost absent-mindedly focused, but with the added factor of controversy has become sustained and structured like a cell in the culture.

The ad’s mischievous wordplay, calculated imagery, and saturated circulation are not simply promotion of a product, but rather a calculated act to draw widespread, lasting attention. While never lost in the controversy, the American Jeans brand itself slips into the background. While it is not incidental nor unnoticed by fashion companies that American Jeans stock rose with the controversy and there was a surge in purchases of its jeans, with respect to immersion, what is seen is the innumerable, almost infinitely varied responses of individuals in their attention. The responses are not programmed as in a movie immersive episode for example, but inspired by the simple, initial act of attention.

The Sweeney jeans/genes ad announces how attention has become assimilated into the phenomenon of immersion. The ad demonstrates how attention easily translates into participation. That one can readily give attention to it and form one's own opinion about it generates in one feelings of participation, individuality, and freedom — not bad qualities for businesses to evoke in their pursuit of profits.

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